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**SHAME, CLASSROOM RESISTANCE, AND BION'S DESIRE NOT TO KNOW****VERGONHA, RESISTÊNCIA EM SALA DE AULA, E O 'DESEJO DE NÃO SABER', DE BION****Marshall Alcorn<sup>1</sup>****Abstract**

*It is not uncommon for students to resist evidence or claims taught by their teachers. This paper uses affect theory from the work of Sylvan Tomkins to understand Wilfred Bion's account of the human "desire not to know." I argue that cultural experiences with shame and disgust set in place biological responses that restrict and attack possibilities for cognitive thought. Classroom experiences that appeal to requirements for "thoughtfulness" should anticipate the biological ground of resistances and seek forms of engagement that respond to resistance through emotional rather than intellectual force.*

**Keywords:** Resistance. Desire not to know. Shame. Pedagogy. Psychoanalysis.

**Resumo**

Não é incomum aos estudantes resistir às indicações ou às teses ensinadas por seus professores. Esse artigo usa a teoria do afeto presente no trabalho de Sylvan Tomkins para entender a descrição Bioniana da característica humana do "desejo de não saber". Eu defendo que experiências culturais de vergonha e indignação tragam à baila respostas que restringem e atacam as possibilidades de pensamento cognitivo. Experiências de sala de aula que apelem para exigências de "sagacidade" deveriam prever o fator biológico das resistências e buscar formas de engajamento que respondam a tais resistências através de forças emocionais, ao invés de intelectuais.

**Palavras-chave:** Resistência. Desejo de não saber. Vergonha. Pedagogia. Psicanálise.

This essay seeks to contribute to a psychoanalytic understanding of pedagogy with particular attention to what has been termed "resistance." Resistance is often imagined as a struggle between two parties. The beliefs of a teacher conflict with the beliefs of a student. This characterization may be largely true, but I worry that the sheer facticity of it frames the problem in an unproductive manner. Teachers are often, of course, in conflict with their students, but if we focus too emphatically on this conflict we ignore the more productive possibilities of another conflict equally present.

My psychoanalytic experience helped me appreciate resistance in terms of Bion's (1962a; 1962b) concept of the "desire not to know." I find this useful because it puts the teacher on the side of the student even in her seeming opposition to him. Bion complicates

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our all too common scenario of a two-mind, struggle-of will, image of a student determinedly resisting a teacher. He focuses instead on resistance as a struggle within a single mind. We observe a process where first there is “interest” in the development of thought, but second there is an aversion to this very interest that is initiated. It is as if people begin a line of thought that promises a solution to a problem, only to discover that the solution involves practices or thoughts that make them uncomfortable. They start out with ideas that are exciting, but they soon recognize, in the jargon of my present students, that they are happier if they “don’t go there.”

Bion assumes that people think to solve problems. Thinking indeed can make life better, but that does not mean that the process of developing an initial thought into a solution to a problem is always successful. Many thoughts begin to develop but are undone by a process Bion calls an “attack on linking” (1959; 1962b). There is a struggle within a thinker between a desire on the one hand, to work out the logical implications of a useful thought and a desire, on the other hand, to avoid the anxiety or even pain that the expanding link to link complexity introduces.

Bion describes the desire-not-to-know as an attack on the following up on an interest. This description of resistance as a turning away from interest has developed has led me to examine Eve Sedgwick’s recent book *Touching Feeling*, in opposition to principles of poststructuralist thought and much psychoanalytic thought, gives serious attention to the alleged biological ground of human emotion. Classroom experience, combined with a set of suggestive observations from Sedgwick, has prompted me to try to develop an account of resistance that links body-based affect theory to psychoanalytic concepts.

Sedgwick, an influential queer theorist in the humanities observes that “shame, of all things, [is] what either enable[s] or disable[s] so basic a function as to be interested in the world” (2003, p. 97).

Sedgwick’s book elaborates two useful positions. First, like a number of other new books in theory, it examines the role of affect in cultural productions. Second, this book seeks to combat what Sedgwick calls the “near inescapable habits of thoughts that Foucault groups under the name of the repressive hypothesis.” By this, Sedgwick refers to practices of binary thinking where two positions fight their way through a simple on/off form of logic that either attacks or defends a contested position. Sedgwick describes this mode of critical engagement as like two people sharing the same electric blanket. One wants the bed warmer, so she turns up the heat, and the other wants to bed cooler and so she turns down the heat.

This struggle goes on without a solution. Sedgwick wants to encourage a more complex form of thinking that offers the sense of a dense interrelated texture for thought, an experience Sedgwick describes as similar to how touching offers the complex sensations of a multidimensional experience. I find this opposition to binary thinking helpful for understanding of resistance; it suggests that we should resist a simple binary understanding of resistance. Instead, we should seek possibilities for resistance in new form of response, something other than the elaboration of an opposing resistance.

Early in an introduction to her own collection of writings from Tomkins, *Shame and its Sisters*, Sedgwick gives emphasis to Tomkins' observation that, "Like disgust, shame operates only after interest or enjoyment has been activated, and inhibits one or the other or both" (SEDGWICK, 1995; p. 5; TOMKINS, 1963, p. 134).

Tomkins' description of shame's disruption of a developing pattern of interest explains claims made by Bion. Tomkins says, "the shame response is an act which reduces facial communication," suggesting that an ongoing bond between two people, teacher and student, for example, can be rudely broken by shame response. Shame thus not only inhibits interest, it disrupts and often wounds a social connection that would encourage interest.

Tomkins argues that shame "stands in the same relation to looking and smiling as silence stands to speech, and as disgust, nausea and vomiting stand to hunger and eating." (1963, p. 352). This insistence upon a close relation between shame and disgust, highlights the biological ground of this affect. Part of the argument is that, for certain experiences that have a cognitive component, there are, in addition, unconscious and relatively instinctive biological patterns that limit possibilities for cognition. There is, one can say a cognitive drive for the mind to look for food that compliments the biological drive of the body to eat. Under the body's drive for hunger, the mind's possibilities for thought are narrowed; the mind is slow to take up work that is other than looking for food. Hunger is a powerful force with particular aims that makes demands upon the mind to secure proper objects. The mind, responding to the prompts of the body, in the experience of hunger, looks for objects. It is acquisitive, explorative, and observant. Serving the biology of hunger, the mind experiences less freedom in the dynamics of thought.

The biological pressure of hunger must be important from a biological point of view because it is charged with the drive to keep the body alive. But though hunger is a powerful drive, there are equally powerful regulations placed upon the drive of hunger. Disgust, it would seem, developed as a biological response providing humans with protection again

eating poisonous or rotten food. We might imagine a hungry early human foraging for food in a forest, coming across a recently killed rabbit, eager to take in the meat, but then instinctively rejecting the meat as the limbic system takes in the smell of rot. This instantaneous biological response to the smell of rot protects the biological organism from unfit or poisonous food. Disgust, then, like hunger is a powerful drive expressing the needs of the body. And it also places limits upon the activity of the mind. We might go further and suggest that from a biological point of view hunger has to be a particularly powerful drive because its goal is to keep the body alive. But if disgust works, then it must be a drive more powerful than hunger as it restrains hunger from its acquisitive function.

Tompkins argues that disgust controls eating just as shame controls looking. This is helpful. Both hunger and looking are actions oriented toward taking objects into the body. Eating physically takes a food object into the body and looking psychologically takes a visual object into the mind. Both of these actions, however, are biologically regulated. Both shame and disgust make biological demands upon the body prompting actions that block the body from taking in an object that is not suitable, either not suitable for biological health, or in effect not suitable for psychological health.

An important biological feature of disgust is that if you feel nausea, you cannot easily eat, even if you think you should. If you do eat, you will have to force yourself to overcome a gag response that is part of the biological experience of disgust. If hunger is a biological force that stimulates a desire to eat, disgust is a biological force that stimulates a desire to not eat.

A key question here is how thought fits into all this. What kind of force can thought have in relation to the biology of either shame or disgust? It would be foolish to imagine that the biological force of disgust can be rendered powerless and inert and neutral by the logic of a rational thought.

What I am inviting you to imagine is that if student resistance is part of a disgust-shame dynamic, then asking a student to take in an “shameful” thought would be like asking a happy sophomore to eat a raw and rotting dead rat. There may be reasons why we would want a student to imagine that this practice is both easy and at times beneficial, but if we do not recognize that there is a disgust response in the body, our every attempt to persuade the student of the usefulness of the idea only repeats the disgust response that make the positive thought unimaginable.

In our own experience, we do not have a disgust response. And so we simply repeat the information we want conveyed. And we may repeat the idea over and over. But when we say “eating a raw rotting dead rat can be good”, the student’s limbic system responds only to the phrase “raw rotting dead rat” and there is a disgust response. The more we repeat the sentence with our emphasis on the words “is good,” in an attempt to convey knowledge, the more we trigger a biological disgust response to the words “raw dead rat.” The resulting verbal interaction thus becomes a farce. The teacher tries to insist on knowledge, but simply reinforces the disgust response by the repetition of her very insistence to teach.

I am proposing that the biological ground of both shame and disgust responses help us to understand what Bion terms the desire not to know. Bion describes of the desire not to know as, at times, an attempt to “evacuate a bad object” (1962b). Bion’s term “bad object” reflects the vocabulary of object relations theory that describes our inner representations of intimate relationships (parents, lovers, friends) as present to us as “internal objects.” Both Freud and Klein argue that our earliest experiences of “taking in” images and relationships are modeled upon the intake of food. Freud (1913) speculated that a boy’s identification works in terms of a fantasy of murdering and devouring the father. Later Freud (1915) uses the term “incorporation” to describe a primitive form of identification. Klein (1932) talks of relationships to the good or bad breasts as internalized objects within the self. In a similar fashion, Tomkins’s understanding of disgust as a response to avoid an object of food becomes a model for expelling an object of contemplation or internalization. If an object is not fit for internalization, it is a “bad object,” and thus an object that we desire not to know and desire not to hold in our minds for thought.

For Tomkins, disgust is a biological response seeking to vomit out food content. Shame is a similar biological response. It stimulates a desire to not look, to not take in an image. Shame and disgust are related phenomena. Once disgust responses are established, we feel shame in inspecting that which is disgusting. And this implication goes further; shame stimulates a desire to not pay attention, to not think, to not follow up on thought itself. It is an often unconscious dynamic in Bion’s description of “attacks on linking.”

Disgust and nausea, Tomkins argues, are originally related to the biological experience of an instinctive refusal of taking in food. He theorizes that disgust is a “built in rejection mechanism specifically designed to enable the individual to avoid or eject food” (1962, p. 50) Kelly observes that “the actions of the head and face when disgust is triggered

involve a forward movement of the head, a protrusion of the tongue, and a pushing down of the lower lip. If this response is very intense then vomiting occurs.” (2009; p. 18)

Much evidence suggests that a large component of the disgust response is both universal and biological. Paul Ekman of the University of California, San Francisco, found that the facial response to disgust was identical in different cultures across the globe. People make this expression by turning up their noses and pulling down the corners of their mouths. Research also show that disgust may produce specific autonomic responses, such as reduced blood pressure, lowered heart-rate and decreased skin conductance along with changes in respiratory behaviour<sup>[21]</sup> MRI scans also reveal that people use a special part of the brain when they are disgusted: the anterior insular cortex.

Late in the 1990s, Valerie Curtis at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine surveyed people in different countries to examine patterns in the disgust response. He found many responses very particular to certain cultures, but he also argued, on the basis of much shared biology, that there was much overlap. Disgust is a common response to things that are unclean or inedible. Curtis speculated disgust could have been one of the first words uttered by humans. "The word 'yuck' is similar in languages all over the world”.

Disgust may develop as literal response to food, but it is clear that disgust responses now cover a wide range of reactions to things that are not tasted, smelled, or ingested. Just as food can be taken in or vomited out in disgust, so also a variety of beliefs or thoughts can be either taken in and metabolized (as they say in my institute) or vomited out in disgust. Furthermore the action described here is represented as, like the biology of disgust, an involuntary almost instinctive response. It is not as if one fully registers a thought and rejects it; it is more like the “smell” of a thought in the process of being formulated is expelled. Some kind of feeling coming into existence as thought is violently rejected.

## **RESISTANCE HAS A BIOLOGICAL INTEGRITY THAT WE MUST RESPECT**

If these arguments have validity, they suggest that what we see as resistance in our students can have a biological integrity that we must respect. We cannot expect to overcome biological “gag” responses by logical arguments. Such an assumption or practices is simply stupid.

I remember my Hindu language teacher during my India Peace Corps training sitting down next to me when I was eating meat. She looked over, about to say something, saw the



food on my plate, and turned away looking a bit sick around the eyes. I would now interpret this as a disgust response. I was anticipating a pleasant conversation. But her response and my own response to her disgust response (laughter) made any conversation between us difficult for a long while.

Our two responses, imply many things about the social and discursive effects of conflicting disgust responses. Her response indicates the link between eating and thinking of eating. She does not eat, but she clearly feels nausea in looking at what I eat. It is her thought that produces her disgust, not her biological taking in of food. I felt uneasy with her response, but my “instinctive” manifest response to her gesture is laughter. My laughter protected my injured pride from a face that expressed disgust with my choice of food. But this laughter did not encourage thoughtful communication between us. It made communication between us uneasy. It wounded her further.

In the Hindu religion, as in most forms of religion, certain kinds of practices and thoughts are experienced as pollution. A high caste Hindu may need to wash her body if she touches food belonging to a low caste Hindu. Brahmins make need to bathe if they step in the shadow of an untouchable. Jews can feel sullied by non-Kosher food. Muslims can feel defiled by the presence of pork. Christians may need to cleanse their souls if they have impure thoughts or practices. We could in fact generalize very widely in this manner. Many religions practice a variety of pollution taboos that restrict the kinds of things people can eat, touch, and think.

I have described disgust responses as an effect of religious belief, but I am confident that the religious element here is a red herring. Any kind of social identification can and usually does involve assimilating a shame or disgust response, or both, to particular ideas or beliefs. It is as if the social demands for psychological cleanliness become built upon innate disgust responses of the body. There is no “natural” disgust response to cooked meat. But with the proper training of children, such a response can be effectively taught.

Work in sociology (SCHEFF; RETZINGER, 1991) argues that shame responses by a group are highly effective mechanisms for the social control of others. It is very difficult for people to think with a free range of thought when they are face to face with others who respond to their behavior with behavior that trains the body in proper shame or disgust responses.

Each social group formulates behavior that is treated as shameful by the group. Unconscious anticipations of shame covertly keep people within acceptable social practices.



Just as disgust policies the body laying down boundaries between inside and outside, clean and unclean, shame experiences lay down boundaries between us and them between thinkable and unthinkable thoughts. Let me give an example from Mattiessen's long novel, *Shadow Country*. The scene I am about to quote from involves a meeting between two kinfolk. One of the characters, Watson, wants to learn more about his family history, but he discovers that asking questions leads to unbearable, I would say "polluting" thoughts. Tomkins calls shame "an inhibitor of interest and enjoyment" (p. 134) and a barrier to further exploration (p. 135). This inhibition is clearly present in this vignette. In this scene, Lucius is talking to his aunt about an incident from the past.

Anxious to pursue his questions before a phone call from Lake City ended the interview, he asked how the family had reacted when Julian and Will were arrested as accessories after the fact in the Mike Tolen case and jailed on one thousand dollars bail. He assumed the family knew of this since it was on the record at the courthouse.

Agitation entered the room like a wild bird through the window, thumping and fluttering behind the curtain. The ladies stared at him.

"Jailed" Ellie Collins drew herself up to stare him down; her baked expression seemed to say. *Is this how your repay me?* The family knew no such thing, she told him in a tone suggesting it could not be true and that, in grubbing through court documents, the self-styled "Professor" had indulged in unprofessional and dishonorable behavior. (MATHIESSEN, 2008, p. 357)

Later this character Lucius, is able to reflect:

if the brothers had testified against an uncle of their blood, they had transgressed the oldest code of those Celtic ancestors who, despising all authority, loyal only to the clan, had borne their tattered pennant of archaic honor across the seas into the New World. (MATHIESSEN, 2008, p. 358)

This sentence informs us that Lucius has asked his aunt to think a polluting thought. The thought she is asked to think is factually true. But it is a thought that is, for her, "unthinkable." The narrator tells us that "those Celtic ancestors" are fairly free of restrictive authorities; they "despise" all authority. Nonetheless they carry situational rules that dictate what is polluting. A few pages later in the novel we are told that the unthinkable of this thought is tied to its experience of shame.

The narrator says, “In the stillness of the old schoolhouse, he suffered with them the weight of shame inflicted on this family by Papa.”

### **The biology of disgust supports the desire not to know**

The work of Tomkins encourages us to consider resistance as part of a complex biological and cognitive process where by the human embodied organism does not take in material that is experienced as poisonous. We normally think of thought as forms of representation managed easily by rational processes. It often seems as if we can logically manipulate all the representations of thought just as we can add numbers in math. The disgust description offered by Tomkins should encourage us to see cognition as having layers of affect, some of which are deeply intertwined with drive behavior and unresponsive to manipulations of conscious thought.

Let me give an example from my own teaching that seems to me to illustrate these ideas. I was teaching Marx to an undergraduate writing class at George Washington University and I knew from experience that many of them would experience my teaching as uncomfortable. I had my students read *The Communist Manifesto* and I wanted to show how the communist ideas of Karl Marx had contributed significantly to contemporary American political practice. Because I anticipated discomfort in my students I decided to assign the class a position statement written by an ultra right wing that I had found on the internet. This group had, in a sense, done the homework that I had asked my class to do. They offered a careful reading of Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* and offered an argument almost exactly similar to the one I wanted to suggest to my class.

The group quoted Marx word for word and sought to formulate broader logical generalizations on the basis of an exact representation. A crucial line in the author’s argument was the following point: “One other thing to remember, Karl Marx was stating in the *Communist Manifesto* that these planks will test whether a country has become communist or not. If they are all in effect and in force the country IS communist” (THE TEN PLANKS, 2006). After listing the ten planks, and showing how for each plank, the American government had set in place a form of government control roughly analogous to the reforms Marx sought, the author concluded that America had become a communist country. Without any ironic qualification, the group suggested that the government of Republican President George Bush, was a Marxist government.

I asked the class to read this argument and then I worked through the points of the argument with them. As I anticipated, the class found the argument hilarious. They could see that some parts of the argument made logical sense. The government of George Bush did appropriate private property. It taxed citizens, imposed zoning laws, and policed its policy relentlessly. In recognizing the socialist dimension of Republican policy, the class showed an ability to be critical of hyperbolic anti-communist sentiment, and I ended the class feeling very good about what I had done. Most people in the class were suspicious of Marxist thought, but they conceded that America had need for a more equal distribution of wealth. It was beneficial to use some tax money to improve education and stimulate economic development in oppressed areas. These ideas were an important contribution to American political practice.

I felt very good about all this. I arrived at my next class on the Manifesto with contended confidence. I had asked students to respond to the ideas of Marx by representing the concrete ideas carefully and then offering a critical response. I began the class by asking one student to read his response. He did so with great enthusiasm. He represented a succession of ideas from the Manifesto and proceeded to argue that each idea was wildly absurd. As he developed his argument, he gained considerable emotional momentum from his audience. I was very interested in this as it seemed to me that my student was repeating stereotypical anti-communist ideas from the 1950s. I had thought that I had dismissed these ideas in my last class. But I had not. At one point in the discussion, my student made an argument like this. “Marx, in his complete failure to understand human nature, wants people to share their money with other people. He wants people to work hard every day for a year and then at the end of this time contribute a portion of their hard earned money to other people who have not themselves bothered to work. This proposal is totally crazy.” At the end of his paper my entire class seemed overjoyed with my students’ gleeful ridicule of Marx.

I think of myself as a teacher not only able to entertain any expression of free thought, but also a teacher who encourages students to speak freely and boldly. In this case, however, I found my self enraged. My students were directing their laughter and ridicule directly at Marx, but indirectly, I thought, they were directing it at me. I felt that I was given the choice to either laugh with them or be the object of their ridicule. Looking back on it now, I suspect that my student was using my emotions to manipulate my thought, just as I had unwittingly done to him in the previous class.

I felt that everything that I had taught before was emphatically negated.

I felt anger and shame, and when the student finished the paper I was caught in an intense self-consciousness and confusion. I was very unsure how to respond. I now understand my response as Tomkin's shame response. I could not follow up on my interests. It was difficult to meet my students' smiling faces with a shared smile.

I was uncomfortable during the laughter and conflicted in my response to it. For a good while I was angry, but unsure about what to say. My anger and conflicted feelings made it very difficult for me to think. When my student finished reading, I was at first at a loss for words. Most of all I wanted to chastise my students for their lack of seriousness. I felt, however, that such an action would make them defensive and thus make it more difficult for me to generate a critical discussion.

After some silence, it occurred to me that I could simply ask my students to talk about what their laughter meant. What did the emotional release of their laughter mean in terms of what they thought about Marx? They were still feeling good with the experience of laughter, and they were slow to respond to my question. Some of them simply had trouble making a shift from laughter to speech, and some of them sensed that I was not nearly as comfortable with the laughter as they were. I experienced then a second moment of uncomfortable silence. My first moment of silence came in my response to their laughter and the second moment came in their response to my question.

Looking back on it now, I think the uncomfortable silence I felt from my class was more uncomfortable for me than for them. They were, I believe, generally feeling good—but having trouble thinking about my question. They labored to shift from laughing to thinking. But I felt the very oppressive weight of more silence. I did not at all feel good. It is as if—and this is a common dynamic of some laughter—if I did not laugh with their dismissive contempt, I placed myself on the side of the object that was treated with contempt. I felt very much carrying the heavy burden of choice. I could enjoy their laughter with them, and part of me wanted to join in this. But I strongly felt that I would betray my principles if I did so.

The weight of this burden lasted perhaps 30 seconds. And this time weighed very heavily upon me. I felt very much deflated by their laughter, and felt stunned a bit and unable to think clearly. I can give those 30 second very thoughtful attention now. At the time I could give nothing careful attention. I felt a good deal of anger, but very little ability to be thoughtful or articulate. I found it very difficult to imagine a useful response to their humor. It was as if the riotous laughter of Bakhtinian carnival had dismissed my authority as a teacher to

ask for serious thought. And so I felt a kind of double powerlessness. I could not myself think clearly and I felt wounded that they would not listen carefully to me even if I could think.

Finally, I decided that I would simply say what I was thinking. I told them that I had the feeling that if I were to argue now that Marx's ideas were innovative contributions to social progress, most of them would dismiss the argument as crazy. I saw some general noddings of agreement and some gleeful expressions. I also sensed an interest in them about what I would say next. This question re-establish a social link between us. And this first step of engagement with them restored my ability to think.

As I began to feel connected, I began to remember clearly my previous class. I began to sort through my memories in order to make sense of what had happened. It occurred to me that what had happened in today's response to Marx was an example of the operations of ideology that we had talked about previously. Today we had experienced the ideas of Marx as obviously and totally crazy, something not worth serious thought. But in fact, this idea that seemed totally crazy today, that a person would want to contribute part of his salary to other more needy people, was exactly, as we had discussed the previous day, a key to the American tax system.

And so what we had done today, was, in a crazy way, to totally dismiss as crazy, a basic and well-established American policy. We dismissed as crazy what in fact we do all the time in perfect good sense. My class, with me, found this observation interesting.

This exchange seemed to loosen up thought for everyone. It suggested that things that are not crazy can seem very crazy in particular emotional contexts. This generated critical interest, and the class became alive again with thought and talk. I had asked them to think about the forces that deflected their ability to think, and they were interested in this line of analysis. As we talked, there was more laughter. This laughter, unlike the laughter earlier, was thoughtful.

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